

Founder's Day

Traffic in Orlando was sparse as he drove on the day before Thanksgiving. His wife had asked him to look at a friend's pool furniture, to see if he approved of her buying the same set for their pool. His head suddenly felt light. The afternoon sun through the windshield was like a warm bath that dissolved all reasons and plans.

Another kind of light struck his eyes, glittering blue and green light as if reflecting off the surface of a smooth sea. The Davis Companies headquarters, a three-story building of tinted glass and stainless steel trim. Of course, he thought. That was where he was going, why he was driving.

He pulled his car into the lot and parked in "Reserved" near the front door.

He opened the door and swung his legs out. A burning pain made him wince. He smoothed his slacks and blazer, tucked his shirt over his large waist, and leaned in to check his hair in the side mirror. Satisfied, he walked to the front door.

Inside, the same blue-green light filtered through an atrium the full height of the building. A receptionist he didn't recognize sat at a desk opposite the front door. The woman asked, "Can I help —"

A security guard interrupted her. "Afternoon, Mr. Davis. Nice to see you again."

"Hello, Harold! Family doing well?"

"Yes, sir. Yours?"

"Everyone's fine, thanks. Grandkids are shooting up like weeds. I'll tell Peggy you asked."

As he walked past the receptionist toward an oak door, the security guard leaned over the desk and touched a button. He opened the door and walked down a hallway.

The offices on both sides of the corridor were empty. He glided past them to a series of low cubicles in Customer Service. A few were occupied by employees, most of them young, who talked quietly on headsets, the clicking of their computer keyboards muffled in the expanse of gray panels.

He reached an elevator at the end of the hallway. He pressed the single button on the wall, and the door opened instantly. The elevator ascended to the top floor.

This looks different. They've remodeled since I left.

Furniture in the hallway matched the paneling on the walls. The framed pictures on the walls were new. He stopped to look at a large photo of Allan Garvey, his successor as president and chief executive officer, standing with a group of men. Each held a shovel and wore a plastic Davis Companies hardhat. Several of the men were Asian.

I know some of those guys. What were the names?

At the end of the hall was the desk of the executive assistant for the senior managers. His secretary, retired a few years after he did. A sign on the empty desk read "Allison Bodie."

*That sounds familiar. I used to be able to remember everyone's name, but I don't know.
Not any more.*

A newspaper lay on the desk in the president's office. If someone has time to read the paper during working hours, they don't have work to do. He saw a quarterly report to stockholders and last year's annual report on a coffee table; he decided to read them and catch up on recent events before calling the managers in. He opened to the section on marketing.

Allison Bodie appeared in the doorway. She wore a black wool suit and black heels that pushed her height nearly to six feet. She had a half-smile, lips that opened over gleaming teeth, but lines at the corners that ran to her chin. Her grimace deepened the lines around her eyes, which were opened wide.

"Mr. Davis! What are you doing here?"

"I'm just catching up," he said. "If I need anything, I'll call you."

She gulped. Her heels clattered to her desk, and she picked up the phone.

"Harold, what is Mr. Davis doing here?"

"I think he just wants to look around," Harold replied. "I mean, he founded this company."

"He's in Allan's office!"

"Used to be his office."

"You know Allan wouldn't let him do that."

"Yeah, well, Mr. Garvey's overseas. Tell you what, Miss Bodie, you make him comfortable, and I'll contact Mr. Parsons or Mr. Michelson."

Allison hung up and took deep, slow breaths. They failed to slow her pounding pulse. In one hour, her ex-husband would ring her doorbell to pick up their daughter for the Thanksgiving holiday. And in three weeks, they'd be back in front of the judge for a custody hearing.

He gazed out the window at the hotel strip on International Drive. He recognized the old High Q hotel, but the round tower carried a name he didn't know. The water slides at Wet 'n Wild, now those he knew, brought his boys there when they were young, spent all day in the

wave pool. To the right of the water park, across the interstate, rose buildings and structures he'd never seen.

What's hard about keeping up with Orlando is separating what was announced but never built from what was never announced but suddenly appears. I'll bet I'm not alone. I don't think anybody knows what's going on in this town.

His head swirled, as it had while he was driving, and his vision blurred for a moment.

When he was a kid, it was simple. Nothing but orange groves. Not only the Davis Groves, but orange trees across the rolling hills to the horizon in every direction. His father and he packed oranges in crates, piled them on the flatbed as high as the slats would allow. They'd stop at Jock's Store in Vineland and get a Nehi. He could taste it now, salty and tart no matter how hot the sun was.

He lost his balance, but held firm to the side of the desk.

How can a tart soda quench your thirst if it's salty? How come it doesn't make you thirstier?

Allison's voice on a telephone in the next room snapped him out of his reverie.

"No, Mr. Sadaki, he's not here today and I don't expect –"

That's who was in the photograph with the shovels. Of course.

He called out, "Is that Masao Sadaki?"

"Yes, Mr. Davis," she said, "but he –"

"Put him through to me, please. I want to say hello."

She asked Mr. Sadaki to hold.

Masao was raised on a farm, just like I was. Both of us know you can get an idea of how much the land is worth by rubbing the dirt between your fingers.

He heard several loud buzzing sounds from Allison's desk. He peered around the corner at the phone on his old desk. Allison was nowhere to be seen. He touched a button whose light was blinking.

"Masao, is that you?"

"Is that my friend Bill?"

"Live and in living color! Happy Thanksgiving!"

"What a surprise! I didn't know you were there."

"I thought I'd stop by and see how things are going. But there's almost no one here."

"Well, then perhaps you can help me. I wanted to learn the status of the hotel project so that I may report to my directors. We understand there are some difficulties with the construction management bid."

"Masao, we've always managed our projects ourselves."

"Our past business was not of this scope. I say that as a compliment to the growth of your company, not as a criticism. But our co-investors require an outside construction management firm for a project this large."

Outside the president's office, Allison buzzed Harold's extension again. This time, the guard answered.

"Harold! Get up here now!" she hissed. "I need help."

"I'm working on it, Miss Bodie. Mr. Garvey's hotel says he's out in the country, and they can't reach him. Steve Michelson's mother says she'll have him call the minute he gets there, but she don't know when that'll be."

She slammed down the phone.

“Look, Masao,” she heard Bill Davis say, “an outside construction manager drives up the cost.”

Sadaki-san was silent for a moment. “Am I to understand that your company does not intend to retain a construction management firm?”

“No, I *didn't* say that. Tell you what, let me look into it.”

“This is very disturbing.”

“No, don't worry, let me find out what's going on, and I'll get back before the end of the day.”

Allison tried the chief operating officer's cell phone. Steve and his wife had just walked off the plane in Detroit. Allison told him the events of the last hour in a quaver that sounded like a small girl telling her mother what her older brother just did.

“You can't reach Allan?” Michelson asked.

“He's hunting. You're in charge.”

“Let me talk to Bill.”

Allison patched the call to the visiting executive's office. She walked in, picked up the handset, and handed it to him with a scowl.

“Hello.”

“Good afternoon, this is Steve Michelson,” Michelson said. “May I ask why you're in Allan's office?”

“Checking up.”

“Please understand that I have the greatest respect for what you've done. But The Davis Companies is publicly traded and –”

“I'm past chairman and largest shareholder.”

"I understand, but with all due respect, you've retired from active —"

"I looked around and realized that I haven't been spending enough time communicating."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Communicating. Making sure that everyone's on the same page, everyone knows what The Davis Companies are all about, how we do business."

"Allison said you gave Masao Sadaki wrong information about the hotel project."

"Who's Allison?"

"My assistant, who let you use that office —"

"Let me? I think you and I need to talk about your job here."

"I report to Allan —"

"Who reports to the board, and they're good friends of mine."

"Only four of them." As soon as he said it, Steve knew that he'd made a mistake.

"We'll talk about that some other time. Right now, I have work to do."

He hung up the phone, and stood up, a little too quickly. He felt a warm rush of dizziness as he stood, and he gripped the edge of the desk to steady himself.

It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was a little like the rush of excitement from bringing something out of the ground that wasn't there until you built it.

But do the people running this place feel like that? Have any of them rubbed dirt between their fingers? Have they smelled the sweet fermentation of orange blossoms after they've fallen to the ground?

The blood returned to his head. He stood and walked back to Allan Garvey's office.

His successor had not changed much in the office. The paint was now a deep green. The golf prints had been replaced by hunting scenes and bird dogs, spaniels and retrievers. A large, wooden rack held two guns, a .22 Winchester rifle and a double-barrel Remington shotgun.

Bill looked at a framed photo on the wall of Allan Garvey and himself. He held a trophy dish – it was in his dining room cabinet now, or was it in his office at home? The plaque read, "Founder's Day. To Bill Davis. For your vision and hard work." Of that he was sure.

It was hard work. They throw in the vision thing when you're a success, but work hard enough at something worthwhile and you'll be a success. You gotta have the right team. It's just like baseball. Everyone plays their position, does their piece of the job, and it all works smoothly. Dad never played much baseball, never finished high school, but he knew how to treat the workers who came from Immokalee or Mississippi, drove straight to our groves during season. They knew they'd be taken care of, least while they were there, paid fairly.

When the lawyers paid Dad all that money for the grove, he never had to work another day in his life. He could just sit on the back porch of his new house and watch the fireworks over Cinderella's Castle. But he still planted orange trees in the back yard. Because once you've had dirt in your hands, everything else is fantasy.

I wouldn't have quit working, either, if the doctor hadn't gotten Peggy so fired up. Blood pressure, dementia. Can't you take medicine to fix that stuff? Shoot, I never could refuse her, not even in college, when she a little sister to my fraternity.

And now, they're not running my company – the company I built, says so on the plaque, on the sign on the building – they're not running it right.

Masao Sadaki telephoned his chairman in Tokyo.

“Bill Davis is back in the office, and they’re not hiring a construction management firm.”

“That cannot be.”

“I just spoke to him at the company headquarters.”

“Call our lawyers in Orlando.”

Masao called a firm that was a member of the same international network as their Tokyo law firm. He asked an attorney in Orlando, not his usual counselor, to find out whether there had been a change of management at The Davis Companies. The lawyer said he would look into it immediately.

A young woman seated near the lawyer, a clerical temp who was paying her bills while waiting for her audition tapes to be reviewed by television news stations, overheard the conversation. When she heard what the lawyer said, she stepped away from her desk and called on her cell phone to a classmate who was the local stringer for the Financial News Network.

“Hey, Tam, I may have a hot tip. I think there’s been a shakeup at The Davis Companies.”

Tamara Nelson thanked her, and immediately telephoned her producer for permission to page the freelance cameraman they used. Check it out first, the producer said, but we don’t have anything besides holiday shopping predictions, so will put you on if your tip is legit.

Steve Michelson called the Park Lane Hotel in London. Allan Garvey wasn’t expected back until very late that night. Then he called Allison.

"I can't do anything from here, Ally. You've got to handle it. Don't let him talk to anyone."

"My daughter's at home by herself," Allison's voice cracked. She heard the phone buzz in the visiting executive office. Bill Davis picked it up.

"Wait there," she told Michelson. "Don't go anywhere."

She covered the phone. "Mr. Davis," she called, "Mr. Michelson asked that you not —"

But he already had picked up the phone.

Tamara Nelson identified herself as a reporter with the Financial News Network.

"No, there's no shakeup," he told her. "We're just going back to how we've always done business. Yes, I'd be happy to say that on camera."

Allison transferred Steve Michelson to Harold's extension near the front door. "Harold," Michelson said, "remove Mr. Davis from the executive offices. Now."

"Mr. Michelson, says up on his picture he's Chairman Emeritus. Besides, he hired me."

"You work for the building manager, who reports to me. Escort Mr. Davis from the building or you're fired."

Michelson called Allison back on her cell phone.

"Davis's home phone is in the database," he said. "Call his wife and ask her to talk to him."

Allison dialed the Davis home. Peggy Davis's voice came on the answering machine immediately, and Allison slammed down the phone.

A few minutes later, a young woman in a suit strode to the front door. She was followed by a heavysset man with a beard and khaki jacket who balanced a large camera on his shoulder.

The woman held the door open for the cameraman and headed straight to Harold. She wasn't tall, but she held her shoulders back and her chin up.

"May I help you?" Harold asked.

"Tamara Nelson from the Financial News Network. Mr. Davis is expecting us."

"I'm sorry, interviews have to be scheduled."

"Please let Mr. Davis know we're here," Tamara insisted.

Harold buzzed Allison's desk.

"Two television people are down in the lobby."

"Oh, God," she groaned. "They can't come in."

"I told them, but there's no one left here. Anyone else shows up, I gonna need some help down here."

"Call the security company and ask them to send two people right away. Tell them it's an emergency."

"I'm on it."

"Thank you," she said in a whisper. "I've got to get my daughter ready. *Please* get Mr. Davis to leave."

"I will. You have a good Thanksgiving, now. You been working too hard."

"I have," she said. Her voice cracked again, and she cried, "Thank you!"

Bill waited for the television crew.

I kind of like this English hunt art. Bird dogs and guns. That's a good theme for our business. We hunted down a lot of jobs.

As Bill thought about hunting for land and bird-dogging investors, he looked at the rifles. He got up from behind the desk and touched the shotgun's barrel stock. It wasn't fastened to the rack. The gun came right off in his hand, and weighed almost nothing. It was made of plastic.

Incredible! What a copy. It doesn't have a trigger, let alone the heft of a gun, but it looks exactly like the real thing.

He pointed it at a bird in a painting on the wall and peered down the sight.

Allison Brody looked in to check on him before heading for the elevator. When she saw the gun in his hand, she screamed, and then ran for the restroom at the end of the hall. Once inside, she locked door. She leaned against the wall, slid to the floor, and sobbed.

"Did you hear that?" the cameraman asked Harold. "It sounded like a scream."

"It's probably the cleaning company's vacuums."

"Would you *please* let Mr. Davis know we're here!" she reporter demanded.

"Now, look, people, y'all need to get outta here. Nobody's interviewing Mr. Davis today."

Two security workers arrived at that moment. Harold told the guards to escort the pretty lady with the good posture and her cameraman from the building, and to let no one in except employees. He was going to find Mr. Davis.

As he reached the elevator, Harold turned and saw that outside the building, the cameraman had set up a floodlight on a tripod. The pretty news lady stood in front of him with a microphone. Harold walked back to the door to tell the security guards that he meant, get them off the property.

A sheriff's cruiser with red and white lights flashing and its siren wailing appeared in the lot. The cruiser pulled up hard to the front door, and squealed to a stop, just in front of the camera man, who turned his camera on the cruiser. Two deputies jumped from the car with their hands on their holstered side arms.

Harold sprinted to the door just as they entered.

One of the deputies asked, "Where are the exits from the third floor?"

"What're you talking 'bout?"

"A woman called in a 911, said a man is on the third floor with a gun, and may kill himself or somebody else. She's locked herself in a rest room."

Harold rubbed his face with his hands.

"Mr. Davis wouldn't hurt anybody. She must've seen him with the fake guns. They're just toys, but she's pretty upset"

He buzzed the president's office.

"Mr. Davis, what's going on up there?"

"I'm waiting for some news people who want to interview me, then I have to find out something for Masao, then I've got to go home. I think Allison's left already. I heard a kind of loud sound. Could be the elevator squeaking. You should look into it. Any sign of the news people?"

"You weren't playing with Mr. Garvey's model guns, by any chance?"

"I was. Very nice. Why?"

"Because Allison's in the bathroom hiding. There's deputies here who want to talk to you."

Just then, a truck with "Channel 9 Eyewitness News" brightly painted in red, black and yellow letters on its side pulled into the driveway, and stopped a short distance behind the deputies' cruiser. Harold told the two contract security guards to get the news truck off the property.

The phone at the reception desk buzzed.

"Harold Simms here."

"Oh, Harold, it's Peggy Davis. Someone called the house about the company, and I can't find Bill, so I wondered if he's there."

"He most definitely is, ma'am. Please, *please* stay on the phone and I'll get him for you."

The deputies were talking over their radios. Harold walked toward the left hall to take the back elevator.

"I can't let you go up there, sir," one of the deputies called to him. "We're getting backup before we secure that floor."

"It's all a misunderstanding, officers," he said. "I'll be right back," and he ducked around the corner for the elevator. On the third floor, Harold found Bill Davis talking to Allison though the locked door of the rest room.

"Mrs. Davis needs to talk to you," Harold said. "It's urgent."

Bill sighed and walked back to the president's office. He picked up the phone and pushed the flashing button.

"Peggy?"

"I've had *five* phone calls from people I don't know who are trying to find you. What on earth is going on?"

"Honey, this place isn't being run the way it should. There's nobody –"

“You were supposed to go by Tom’s house and look at his patio furniture to see if it’s what you want for our pool.”

I was, wasn't I.

“What is all this commotion about?”

“I think I need to be here more often. The last time was that Founder’s Day thing, and I couldn’t even tell –”

“Bill, you’re retired. I’m coming over there right now with Tom, and he’ll drive your car home. I don’t want you to drive. Anyway, I need you to help get the house ready for Thanksgiving.”

“Honey, they need me here.”

“I need you more.”

Bill thought about that. Peggy sounded again like the little sister at the fraternity. He’d never been able to say no to her.

“Okay, I’ll be with Harold. He’s the only person here I can communicate with, anyway.”

Bill’s leg muscle ached from standing. He sat down at the desk and looked up. His gaze met the eyes of an Irish setter in one of Allan’s hunting prints. He sat perfectly still and smiled at the dog in the painting. The dog seemed to smile back. Neither of them moved.

Bill was still sitting in the chair, smiling at the dog in the painting, when Harold came to escort him to the lobby.

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